

# Folsom calls for a north-south freeway through western half of Alabama

By Phillip Rawls  
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MONTGOMERY | Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. wants lawmakers to help pave the way for a Florence-Mobile freeway that he hopes will help revitalize poor areas of west Alabama.

He asked legislators Thursday for a commission to study how to pay for and build the freeway spanning nearly 300 miles between the state's northwestern and southwestern corners.

Folsom, 58, said state officials have been discussing the need for such a freeway since he was a child. He made it an issue in his 2006 campaign.

But he said, "There has not been the major effort put forth to see this project through."

At a news conference with 17 Democratic and Republican legislators, the Democratic lieutenant governor urged the legislature to create a commission to explore both public and private financing for the project.

Appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the House, it would report to the Legislature in February.

Supporters said a four-lane road running parallel to the Mississippi state line would bring jobs to a part of Alabama that is poor, rural and dependent on timber and agriculture.

Citing the movie "Field of Dreams," Sen. Hank Sanders, D-Selma, said, "If we build the road, economic development will come."

Sen. Rusty Glover, R-Semmes, said the highway would offer the Midwest better access to Alabama's coast, which could promote tourism on Alabama beaches. He said it would also provide better truck routes for coastal industries.

Gov. Bob Riley's communications director, Jeff Emerson, said creating a commission is fine with the Republican governor, who has been promoting public-private partnerships to build more roads in Alabama.

But he said the Senate, where Folsom presides, needs to pass a toll road bill that has already cleared the House. It would allow the state's toll road authority to enter public-private financing agreements.

Under the bill, when all bonds, indebtedness, leases and agreements involving a toll project are satisfied or expired, the road or bridge would be transferred to the state Department of Transportation. The department would then own and operate the road or bridge.

Alabama currently has four privately owned toll bridges, but no toll roads.